

The Historical Evolution Characteristics of Ancient Chinese Arts and Crafts

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Abstract: Chinese ancient arts and crafts provide rich elements and inspiration for contemporary art design. To deepen the understanding of the development history and inherent characteristics of ancient arts and crafts can help us draw nutrients from them, effectively cultivate contemporary social and cultural confidence, and promote the protection and inheritance of ancient arts and crafts. This study provides an overview of the ancient Chinese arts and crafts, combs the historical evolution process of the ancient Chinese arts and crafts, discusses the internal characteristics of the ancient arts and crafts from three perspectives: color characteristics, pattern characteristics and form characteristics, so as to deepen the understanding and cognition of the ancient arts and crafts, highlight the charm and significance of the ancient arts and crafts, and achieve the revival of ancient arts and crafts.

Keywords: Ancient Arts and Crafts; Intrinsic characteristic; Traditional art; Historical evolution

1. INTRODUCTION

Ancient Chinese arts and crafts, with a long history of development, can be traced back to primitive tools, representing a sense of glory and historical significance for the Chinese nation.

Ancient arts and crafts exhibited a certain aesthetic appeal and charm in the daily lives of our ancestors, showcasing a complete and distinct artistic style that embodies the traditional culture of the Chinese people. Even today, ancient Chinese arts and crafts continue to influence the development of contemporary manufacturing and design industries in terms of aesthetics, craftsmanship, and forms.

They hold significant value for studying the evolution of the times. Conducting research on the historical evolution and distinctive features of ancient Chinese arts and crafts is of great importance.

By gaining a deep and clear understanding of their inherent characteristics and developmental processes, and exploring their cultural connotations, we can present the world with more exquisite and classic folk arts and crafts, and facilitate the effective integration of ancient arts and crafts with contemporary design.

2. OVERVIEW OF ANCIENT CHINESE ARTS AND CRAFTS

As an important component of traditional Chinese art and culture, ancient folk arts and crafts in China are incredibly diverse in terms of styles and varieties.

They possess the general characteristics of arts and crafts and showcase the distinct cultural personality of the Chinese nation, making them artistic treasures. Ancient Chinese arts and crafts authentically reflect the ingenious ideas of our ancestors, combining practicality and aesthetics while embodying profound philosophical values. They have left a significant mark in the history of the development of arts and crafts.

Ancient Chinese arts and crafts refer to the handmade creations and handicrafts produced by the people using various craft techniques and materials to meet their material and spiritual needs. This art form integrates folk aesthetics and practicality, with a focus on everyday objects and collectibles that carry artistic value.

Depending on the materials used, ancient arts and crafts in China can be categorized into various types, such as bamboo, teeth, horn, glass, metal, jade, stone, textiles, lacquered wood, and ceramics. They are products that combine aesthetics with life, art with science. Ancient arts and crafts exhibit aesthetic features such as harmony, symbolism, craftsmanship, liveliness, and a sense of natural beauty. Their artistic styles are elegant and possess unique realms and charm, carrying the aesthetic consciousness and cultural spirit of the Chinese nation.

With their exquisite craftsmanship, rich forms, and unique styles, the diverse and abundant ancient arts and crafts subtly influence people's aesthetic perceptions, enriching their cultural and aesthetic values. They serve people in various ways and silently impact their sense of beauty, adding a profound humanistic touch to their lives.

From the early Neolithic era with pottery, ivory, and stone jade, to the feudal era with furniture, lacquerware, and ceramics, and then to the Yuan Dynasty with metalwork, cotton spinning, and architectural decorations, ancient Chinese arts and crafts have undergone continuous development, improving their production techniques, stylistic craftsmanship, artistic styles, and production patterns.

However, from an overall perspective, ancient Chinese arts and crafts embody a traditional sense of elegance and solemn artistic beauty. Although the artistic expressions may differ due to the variations in different historical periods, the cultural spirit they encapsulate is consistent, showcasing a distinct Chinese aesthetic style (Xu & Zhang, 2022). As the

products of practical artistic creations in the era of handicrafts, ancient Chinese arts and crafts demonstrate their design excellence in various aspects, including creative ideas, structural forms, material techniques, functional implementations, and artistic expressions.

They have greatly propelled and promoted the development of modern nationalized design, carrying significant value in art and design research. They provide reliable theoretical support and broaden the scope of design thinking, contributing to the advancement of modern design (Cheng, 2019).

3. THE HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF ANCIENT CHINESE ARTS AND CRAFTS

To further deepen our understanding of ancient Chinese arts and crafts, it is important to have a clear understanding of their developmental process, grasp the overall historical evolution, and thereby comprehend the deep cultural characteristics and inherent spirit. This will allow us to recognize the remarkable achievements of ancient Chinese arts and crafts.

3.1 The Neolithic Age

With the development of modern archaeology, it has been discovered that ancient Chinese arts and crafts existed as early as the Neolithic era. Exquisite woven items, stone jade, pottery, and other artifacts not only possess strong aesthetic value but also serve practical purposes.

This indicates that craftsmen of that time possessed advanced craft-making abilities, skillfully utilizing material properties, and had a comprehensive understanding of formal aesthetics. They expressed the traditional aesthetics and artistic ideas of creation.

3.2 Shang and West Zhou periods

During the Shang and Western Zhou periods, ancient Chinese arts and crafts experienced significant development and progress. The spiritual and practical aspects of craftwork were greatly enriched. During this time, elements of religion and social consciousness gradually became integrated into ancient arts and crafts.

Craftworks such as lacquerware and celadon ceramics, representative of this period, fully reflected people's religious worship and ethical values. They possessed unique aesthetic charm and expressed the ancient people's imagination, understanding, and sense of awe towards the world.

3.3 The period of the Spring and Autumn to Qin and Han dynasties

In the process of historical development and transition, ancient Chinese arts and crafts reflected the ideology and economic strength of feudal society. During the Spring and Autumn, Warring States, and Qin-Han periods, with the rise and development of rationalist thinking, people's value pursuit gradually shifted towards practical utility. The created works of ancient arts and crafts not only possessed aesthetics and ornamental value but also emphasized practical functionality. Through these works, a harmonious integration of romanticism and form was achieved, inheriting traditional culture and exhibiting exuberant, lively, and light characteristics (Zeng, 2017). Through the realistic style of the Terracotta Warriors and Horses of the Qin Dynasty, one can observe the grandeur and simplicity of ancient arts and crafts during that period. In contrast, the ideological content conveyed by the Han Dynasty's silk textiles, pottery, and other ancient arts and crafts shifted from Taoism to Confucianism, exhibiting a rustic, natural, and solemn aesthetic characteristic.

3.4 The period of the Three Kingdoms, the Two Jins, the Northern and Southern Dynasties

With the continuous development of socio-economic, political, and cultural aspects, there were significant changes in ideology during this period, leading to a transformation in the production pattern of ancient arts and crafts, as well as a shift in the pursuit of artistic value. During the Three Kingdoms, Jin Dynasty, and Northern and Southern Dynasties period, the southern region became a center for the production of ancient arts and crafts. The emphasis was placed on using craftworks to express one's personality and psychology. Religious crafts, architecture, and celadon ceramics, among others, were primarily designed around the spiritual essence of the individual, conveying a calm and tranquil aesthetic style (Yi et al., 2017).

3.5 Tang Dynasty

During the Tang Dynasty, ancient arts and crafts reached a pinnacle of development and showed a prosperous trend. Woodworking, dyeing and weaving, gold and silverware, and ceramics were typical forms of ancient arts and crafts during this period. The production techniques were highly skilled and mature, and there was a large-scale production. The Tang Dynasty achieved a great national unity, leading to significant progress and development in fields such as literature, arts, philosophy, and religion.

There were multiple diverse factions, and a culture characterized by openness and confidence. The social and cultural landscape had a feature of inclusiveness. Under this unprecedented cultural prosperity and influenced by the spirit of people's striving for progress and vitality, ancient arts and crafts exhibited a style characterized by richness, elegance, delicacy, simplicity, and grandeur, which was consistent with the cultural atmosphere of that time.

3.6 Song Dynasty

During the Song Dynasty, the entire society was in a stable state, with continued steady development in politics, culture, and socioeconomics. The level of craftsmanship also improved, laying a solid foundation for the development of arts and crafts. In this period, the dominance of Confucianism replaced the diverse cultural landscape, guided by the ideology of "Neo-Confucianism" advocated by Cheng-Zhu School. People gradually upheld the idea of aligning human desires with the principles of heaven, leading to a preference for a more subtle and detached artistic style.

Furniture, metalwork, ceramics, and textiles were the main forms of arts and crafts in the Song Dynasty. They featured simple and plain shapes, minimalistic decorations, and elegant color palettes. The patterns and designs were meticulously arranged, presenting a distinct aesthetic style that differed greatly from the grandeur of the Tang Dynasty, creating a harmonious fusion of the inner world and the external objects (Zhang, 2021).

In the cultural environment that emphasized literary pursuits and rationality, the Song Dynasty established the central position of Confucian culture. Ceramic arts and crafts formed a complete paradigm during this period, showcasing specific artistic conception and ensuring the harmony between the creative process and the aesthetic ideals of the subjects. Many arts and crafts works drew inspiration from and incorporated the essence of traditional ethnic culture and aesthetic concepts, reflecting the principles of creation and exerting a significant influence on the development of later and even contemporary arts and crafts.

3.7 The period of the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties

After the Mongol Empire's invasion and unification, the field of arts and crafts in China was significantly influenced by nomadic culture. Prominent examples of crafts from the Yuan Dynasty include blue and white porcelain, underglaze red porcelain, and brocade textiles, which showcased

a robust and heroic style. In the Ming Dynasty, with the flourishing economy, arts and crafts made great progress and developed into more formulaic works with a characteristic of simplicity and dignity. During the Qing Dynasty, a new cultural environment emerged, accompanied by significant scientific development. In this context, the field of arts and crafts reached a higher level of advancement. Not only did it diversify in terms of categories, but the craftsmanship also became more refined and sophisticated, integrating the strengths of previous dynasties (Wu, 2018).

In the design process of Qing Dynasty arts and crafts, noble aesthetics were incorporated, and great emphasis was placed on craftsmanship. Particularly in architectural decoration, goldsmithing, cotton spinning, and furniture, exquisite and intricate works were created, showcasing meticulous carving.

Under the influence of two periods of Northern nomadic rule, the traditional ethnic culture and aesthetic concepts embodied in ancient arts and crafts during the Yuan, Ming, and Qing periods gradually weakened. While maintaining the original elegant and understated artistic style, there were constant changes between the mundane and the refined, restraint and expression, complexity and simplicity, always adhering to the fundamental design principles rooted in Confucianism.

Furthermore, after the outbreak of the Opium Wars, ancient Chinese arts and crafts were also influenced by Western cultural ideas, leading to significant changes in production patterns, craft structures, and stylistic characteristics.

On one hand, there was adherence to traditional craft ideas and imitation of previous dynastic styles, while on the other hand, differentiation occurred, leading to innovation and renewal.

4. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF ANCIENT CHINESE ARTS AND CRAFTS

On the basis of understanding the historical evolution of ancient Chinese arts and crafts, it is necessary to analyze their color, pattern, and form characteristics in order to reflect the cultural spirit of different eras through ancient artworks, showcasing the temporal value of ancient Chinese arts and crafts.

4.1 Color Characteristics

As an intuitive visual element in the design of ancient arts and crafts,

color determines the presentation effect of the works. Folk aesthetics are fully reflected in the colors of ancient arts and crafts. For example, many elegant and rustic practical craft utensils are often paired with white, blue, and green colors.

On the other hand, craft artworks with functions of warding off evil, attracting blessings, and giving warnings often use yellow and red colors. In the design process of intricately carved ancient arts and crafts, the concept of colorful inlay is employed, specifically referring to the rendering of colors in the works using various bright and metallic colors. This conveys the fondness for gold and silver objects, expresses a deep pursuit of wealth and luxury, and showcases a sense of joy (Hu, 2022).

The color design habits of ancient arts and crafts can fully demonstrate the rich emotions of the designers and facilitate a better understanding of the social customs and human sentiments of different periods.

Taking Tang Dynasty gold and silverware as an example, the silver high-footed cup with hunting patterns and the silver eight-lobed cup with floral and bird patterns both have strong practical functions. Although their shapes differ, they are full of Western charm, and metallic colors are used in the color design process to embody a sense of elegance and luxury.

On the other hand, the plain silver high-footed cup and the gold four-lobed cup with circular floral patterns are paired with metallic colors and a rounded and soft appearance. Although their volume is greatly reduced, the color design highlights the aristocracy's pursuit of magnificence and luxury, creating a visually striking effect. Please refer to the illustration below for more details:



Figure 1: Silver stem cup with hunting pattern



Figure 2: Silver eight-curved long cup with flower and bird pattern



Figure 3: Plain silver stem cup



Figure 4: Golden four-curved long cup with posy design.

4.2 Pattern Characteristics

When craftsmen design and conceive patterns for ancient arts and crafts, they draw inspiration from patterns with a long history of development and apply specific patterns with distinctive cultural characteristics to decorate their works. The established patterns in decorative arts and crafts have accumulated and evolved since the Neolithic period, including fish patterns, net patterns, lotus flower patterns, intertwined lotus patterns, and plum, orchid, bamboo, and chrysanthemum patterns.

Different patterns also have different symbolic meanings. Among them, the culturally symbolic plum, orchid, bamboo, and chrysanthemum patterns represent pride, tranquility, serenity, and leisure, and they are important elements in the creation of poems and paintings by literati. The folded lotus and intertwined lotus patterns are mostly applied in ceramic decorations, symbolizing auspiciousness and the continuation of life. Additionally, there are also animal motifs such as peonies, sheep, roosters, and magpies, which symbolize people's aspirations for happiness, wealth, smoothness, and good health.

The patterns in ancient arts and crafts reveal the simple and innocent wishes of the ancients and reflect a strong folk aesthetic concept. Most of these patterns carry blessings and the pursuit of beauty, making them widely applied in folk utensils. The acceptance and popularity of these patterns among the people can be attributed to their commonality and association.

Despite the continuous changes in dynasties, people still maintain specific aesthetics and spiritual pursuits. Craftsmen continue to incorporate patterns with positive meanings into their artistic works (Wu, 2018). Taking the horse pattern as an example, it has been widely used in ancient arts and crafts. Before the Tang Dynasty, wings were often added to the horse pattern, referred to as "heavenly horse," which has a great connection to Han Dynasty mythological legends.

It was used to express the auspiciousness brought by virtuous rulers. Sometimes, it was paired with phoenixes, birds, and celestial creatures such as Tianlu. (See Figure 5). In Tang Dynasty brocade patterns, the variant baophanghua (a type of flower pattern) was a frequently used early floral pattern and one of the traditional auspicious patterns. It closely relates to the supplementary pattern of lianlian zhuquan (connected pearl circles) and shares a cross-shaped structure.

They have similar imagery, and various patterns can be seen (see Figure 6). The composition of the variant baophanghua brocade is very intricate, with densely organized patterns and splendid colors. It represents the

advanced level of craftsmanship in the Tang Dynasty, achieving an effective combination of visible patterns, color matching, and brocade weaving. It also reflects the flourishing cultural and artistic scene of the Tang Dynasty, as it was a product of cultural assimilation and inclusiveness.



Figure 5: Brocade silk with linked-pearl and couple horse pattern



Figure 6: Brocade silk with four variants patterned of baoxiang flowers

4.3 Form Characteristics

The ancient arts and crafts derived from everyday folk utensils place a strong emphasis on practicality and convenience in their design process, featuring fixed forms. For instance, in the design of a pot, considerations for the depth, diameter, and external appearance of the pot body, handle, and lid are made to balance aesthetics and functionality. Various aspects such as the stress points of the handle, smoothness of water pouring from the spout, and curvature of the pot body are taken into account. In ancient agricultural societies, where people led settled lives, the shapes of utensils

needed to be convenient for placement and exhibit stability and practicality.

However, with the influence of nomadic cultures, some utensils were primarily designed for portability to adapt to ever-changing living environments. Therefore, it can be observed that people's way of life directly influences the forms of ancient arts and crafts (Wu & Huang, 2022). For example, the design of the leather bag-shaped pot during the Liao Dynasty underwent changes from single opening to double openings and eventually to the addition of a handle. Initially, the design aimed for stability and to prevent spillage, while in later periods, the changes were focused on facilitating pouring. This fully demonstrates the transition of the nomadic people towards a semi-settled lifestyle.

The unique design of the Fu Hao Bronze Tripartite Zun from the Shang Dynasty is also attributed to its pursuit of practicality. As a cooking utensil, its upper and lower compartments serve the functions of holding food and water, respectively, while the middle section has holes for heating and cooking. The Fu Hao Bronze Tripartite Zun can simultaneously heat three kinds of food. Although it lacks elaborate construction design, its form embodies the beauty of functionality and exhibits excellent performance in practical use, as shown in the image below (Figure 7). Taking the carved blue and white porcelain wine pourer and wine cup from the Jingdezhen kiln in the Northern Song Dynasty as an example, they have undergone certain changes in their forms compared to similar vessels, mainly influenced by people's practical needs. Considering the size of the vessels, they can be divided into two categories: tea pourers without accompanying cups and wine pourers with accompanying cups. The blue and white porcelain wine pourer and cup are paired to warm the wine, making it convenient for people to drink, as shown in the image below (Figure 8).



Figure 7: “Fu Hao” triple bronze Yan (food container)



Figure 8: Green and white porcelain wine pouring and pouring bowls with kiln carved flowers of Jingdezhen in Northern Song Dynasty

In summary, Chinese ancient arts and crafts exhibit different colors, patterns, and forms in different periods, reflecting the characteristics of traditional culture during each period. Therefore, through ancient arts and crafts, we can understand the changes in cultural consciousness and economic development. From the Shang Dynasty, Zhou Dynasty, Warring States period, Han Dynasty, Tang Dynasty, Song Dynasty, Yuan Dynasty, Ming Dynasty, to the Qing Dynasty, the styles of ancient arts and crafts have undergone continuous changes, ranging from majestic and solemn, orderly and structured, solemn and richly luxurious, rational beauty, bold and unrestrained, intricate and elaborate, and so on. They all embody the beauty of folk creative ideas, structural design, and functional realization. This fully showcases the cultural pursuits, spiritual aspirations, and aesthetic concepts of different periods.

5. CONCLUSION

Chinese ancient arts and crafts have a history of thousands of years and have developed their own unique system. They embody the wisdom of the people and the elites, presenting a harmonious, subtle, and exquisite personalized style. Ancient arts and crafts are not only the integration of technology and art but also the harmonious unity of practicality, aesthetics, form, and content. They play a role in aesthetic education through their interaction with the environment. They can purify the soul, guide behavior, and reveal the interdependence and mutual promotion between material civilization and spiritual civilization. By delving deep into the historical

heritage of Chinese ancient arts and crafts and understanding their historical evolution, we can discover their broad and inclusive cultural characteristics, their subtle and elegant nature, and their unique Chinese artistic features. The external forms and internal culture are unified, making them an important carrier for the dissemination of Chinese civilization. In the current context of the blending of diverse cultures, it is necessary to fully rely on Chinese ancient arts and crafts to effectively promote the inheritance and promotion of excellent traditional culture. This will greatly enhance the cultural self-confidence and pride of the nation and rediscover the charm of ancient arts and crafts in the new era. It is also an exploration of a scientific path for the modern design industry to develop in a nationalized manner, providing assistance to the development of the modern design industry.

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